

Interview with LCDR Harry C. Helm (1914-2011), World War II physician and flight surgeon aboard training carrier USS *Wolverine* (IX-64), and USS *Yorktown* (CV-10), who witnessed fleet in Tokyo Harbor from the air prior to surrender ceremonies. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, 13 December 2000.

When did you join the Navy?

I finished Vanderbilt Medical School in 1940 and then went to a year's internship at the Norfolk General Hospital, not the naval hospital. Then you had to apply for a commission or be drafted. So, I applied for a commission in the spring of '41, in May, I think. It was enough to keep me from having to register for the draft. I finished my internship on the first of July. Right then they were building a lot of ships and needed staff for them, but they didn't have an assignment for me. So, they put me on a standby basis and gave me 2 weeks' notice when they were going to activate us. I went down to the general hospital in Greenville, SC, as a surgical resident. My date of rank was sometime in August. My first assignment was at the School of Aviation Medicine in Pensacola. I was there when Pearl Harbor occurred.

You trained to be a flight surgeon.

Yes.

Where did you go after you left there?

Anacostia Naval Air Station. Actually, I was up at 14th and G Street in Washington at the Naval Aviation Cadet Selection Board doing flight physicals for people trying to get into flight training, and I worked out of Anacostia.

What kind of duties did you have at Anacostia?

Examine duty. It's that same kind of stuff for enlisted men that were on duty in Washington that wanted to enlist in naval flight training. It was pretty dull duty. And in addition to that they had the V-12 program at different universities, so I traveled five states: North Carolina, the eastern part of Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, and DC doing flight physicals at schools where they had V-12 programs. And cadets who were in V-12 that wanted to switch into flight training would take the flight physicals. I'd take a group of corpsmen and we'd do the flight physicals right on the campus. Once we did it in DC at 14th and G Streets where we had an examining station.

In a typical flight physical, what types of things would you have examined for?

Well, they had that spinning chair. You'd spin a man, like in a barber chair, five times in 15 seconds and let him out of the chair and see if he could walk. It would test his semi-circular canals to see about distance and his sense of balance. If he could do it sitting up right then you could let him put his head down forward. And at nine degrees forward it knocked all your balance off. Then when you straightened up you'd fall over sideways. Pulse and blood pressure. You'd step up and down off a bench 12 and a half inches high five times in 10 seconds, or something like that, and you'd stand there with a stopwatch and you'd take his blood pressure and pulse before and after. Then there was an eye examination.

If they passed everything you just mentioned, they could go on to flight school?

As far as their physical qualifications were concerned, they could, yes. They'd put them on the list. Now there was also a mental exam showing different pictures, common sense things. I don't remember any of them except one that asked, "Which wheel would run faster on a railroad car going around a curve?" What's the answer to that?

Which wheel runs faster? I imagine the inner wheel.

Okay, but they're on a fixed axle.

On a fixed axle it's the same speed.

That's right. It seems like that general intelligence test questions or pictures that you'd pick out, "What's wrong with this picture?"

So, you were on examining duty for a good while then?

Let's see, for that summer of '42. I finished in Pensacola in about March of '42 and then moved to Anacostia. I went on from there to the carrier USS *Wolverine*, which was a coal-burning, hand-fired, side-wheeler aircraft carrier. Being a coal-burner, it made cinders. And those things would lodge in the deck. And then when a plane went down the deck, these cinders would go flying around. It was dangerous.

A side-wheeler? Why would they call it a side-wheeler?

Well, because it was a side-wheeler. You know what I mean by side-wheeler? They had paddle wheels on each side of it, just like an old steam boat.

It had paddle wheels on it like an old side wheeler steamboat?

That's exactly right. And on Lake Michigan.

Oh, really? This must have been an ancient ship!

Well, it was. The *Langley* had been around a while and was also used for training.

But that wasn't a side-wheeler. It was a regular prop-driven ship.

That's right. It had originally been a collier.

I got my *Dictionary of American Fighting Ships* open and it's got a picture of the *Wolverine* right here. It says the iron side-wheeler *Michigan*, renamed *Wolverine*, late in her life. This thing was built in 1913!

You're on the right page. The original owner of it was C & B, which was the Cleveland and Buffalo Transit Company.

It says here it was owned by the Cleveland and Buffalo Transit Company.

That's exactly right.

This thing has masts. It's like a regular sailing ship. This picture, an old picture of it has it as a...

Okay. The first ship. And then they tore off the deck that had the cabins on it. They tied up in Buffalo and tore it off there. They towed it to Cleveland and built a flight deck on it at American Shipbuilding and Drydock Company. There's no hangar deck.

It says it was the Navy's first side-wheeled aircraft carrier.

That's right, and before the war was over, there was another one on Lake Michigan, too-- the *Sable*. It was a different type of duty, I'll tell you.

It says they trained lots of carrier pilots on this thing.

Everybody who went through primary flight training down at Pensacola then went to fighter school in Miami or bomber school at Jacksonville, or went to torpedo school at Melbourne, FL. After you finished that they put you on the train and you went to Lake Michigan and you made your first five carrier landings. Then you went to sea.

What kind of aircraft were they landing with?

You couldn't get much speed with those ships so if the wind wasn't blowing, the ship had to run against the wind to make wind over the deck. They used F4F Wildcats, F6F Hellcats, and the TBF Grumman Avenger torpedo planes.

And they could land on this thing with those planes?

Yes, sir. They hoped they did.

I guess they didn't have a lot of choice. If they missed, they were in trouble.

It got pretty wild and exciting because that was their first carrier landings. They also landed SBDs, the dive bombers. Sometimes, due to lack of planes, they would let them check out with SNJs, the North American Texan. It was a training plane really used for instrument training. It wasn't a combat aircraft, but you could get by with it.

When you were at Pensacola training to be a flight surgeon, did you get to fly at all?

Yes, sir. I checked out in N3Ns. Those were open cockpit biplanes originally made by Boeing but these N3Ns were made at the Naval Aircraft Factory in Philadelphia. They were called "Yellow Perils." I soloed in one. The best part of it was that I got flight pay the rest of the war. Even on Lake Michigan, I got flight pay and sea pay.

As I was saying, the people came on the train from Jacksonville right up through Chattanooga and Nashville, then on to Chicago and then to Glenview Naval Air Station, just northwest of Chicago. Then the carrier would get out on the lake, and depending upon which way the wind was . . . The lake is not too wide so if the wind was east or west, you'd run out of sea room in a couple of hours. Then you'd have to turn around and take your planes aboard and run back across to start again. Lake Michigan gets rough. You don't think about it, but the winds get rough, and the water gets rough. Sometimes there are 40-foot waves and I'm not kidding. Sometimes you couldn't turn the thing because it was top-heavy with that flight deck on it. It would sway badly. You were afraid that if you turned abruptly, it might turn turtle. The wind could catch you broadside and throw you over. That had a lot to do with flight operations.

What kind of sick bay did you have on the *Wolverine*?

It was a pretty nice affair about like you'd have on a destroyer. We had an operating room. One time, during a storm, the operating table got loose from the deck and plunged around widely back and forth in the storm. We couldn't get in there to fix it. Finally, some sailor was able to lasso it with some line and haul it over to one side while the ship rolled the next time. Then he could get in and tie it off. It was a different kind of duty.

Did you ever have to perform any surgery out there?

People would get hurt when they'd land, and you'd have to take a few stitches occasionally. On April 13th in '43 a snowstorm came up and we lost five pilots in about 30 minutes. They had come from Florida and no one had taken the trouble to tell them about carburetor heat on the plane and they iced up. We were out there when we got a radio call from Glenview telling us about the storm. They told us to get the planes aboard. But we were out of sea room and couldn't take them aboard right then. We were running into the shore. We had to turn back into the lake for about 10 minutes and by the time we had turned back around into the wind, they were all in the water. Nobody had ever instructed them about carburetor heat.

What were they flying?

SBDs.

Did the SBD have that particular feature on them?

Yes, they did, but nobody ever told them how to reach down and turn it on. We were in radio contact with the pilots, of course. They were telling us that they were icing up and losing power. They went in the water. One turned and tried to go west and get to shore and he went in the water off the Edgewater Beach Hotel. Somebody was able to get a boat loose and go out and get him out. We had nine pilots in that group that day. One flew south and jumped. The plane crashed in Hammond, IN, south of the lake. He was saved. One flew west. There was a runway right about where O'Hare Airport is today. But that runway was restricted and you couldn't land there. I think it was a Dodge operation where they were building planes. This pilot made a downwind landing on that runway. He was saved. But I think four of them ended up in the lake. We found two right that day and I think some other boats found the other two. It was a very sad day. I was on the *Wolverine* for 42,000 landings.

Did the Wolverine have an island on it like other carriers?

Yes.

This photo I have shows it with masts as a sailing ship and you can see the side wheel paddles on it.

The bad thing about Lake Michigan is the fact that it has ice in winter. The lake would freeze up about 3 miles out.

I imagine those paddles didn't much good in the ice.

It would tear them up. You couldn't operate. So in the winter months from December to about March, we had to tie it up at the Navy pier at the foot of Randolph Street right behind the breakwater.

Was there any training going on in the winter?

The air group moved to San Diego during the winter.

Did you go?

No. I stayed with the ship.

Business must have been pretty slow for you during that time?

That's right. We'd get ashore and go to Chicago almost every night.

Where did you go after you completed duty on the *Wolverine*?

I was assigned to VS-57, a scouting squadron. I heard through the grapevine that that was Kodiak, AK. The scouting squadrons were descommissioned. They had no use for scouts. I then went to Treasure Island near San Francisco and waited in a pool for transportation. I didn't know where I was going. So, then they changed my orders from VS-57 to VS-51. And I didn't know where that was. I ended up with orders to COMAIRSOPAC, Commander, Aircraft, South Pacific, and went to Guadalcanal.

When did you get there?

It was '44.

Where did you report when you got there.

I was an extra doctor in the pool. First, I went to Kukum Beach on Guadalcanal. It was a New Zealand fighter squadron which a Marine squadron had replaced. So, I was assigned to the Marines for the next several months. There was still activity going on. When somebody would get sick, or go down to Melbourne for leave, I was the extra man. I'd go from island to island and replace the doctor.

But you were still doing flight surgeon activities.

Whatever came up. It was general duty because there weren't that many doctors around.

While I was out there, I got dengue fever. I believe I was in the Russell Islands at the time. I almost kicked the bucket on that.

Were you in a hospital?

In a tent hospital. It was one of the mobile hospitals. After rest and rehabilitation, I was assigned to Tutuila Island in American Samoa. That turned out to be nice duty. I was at the naval air station known as Coconut Point at Pago Pago.

What were you doing there?

Just general duty on the air station. Mrs. Roosevelt had come just before I got there. A bunch of Marines had drunk wood alcohol and five of them died. They had just had that funeral when Mrs. Roosevelt showed up.

About that time I asked for combat duty so I could get enough points to go home.

Well, you got your wish.

Not exactly. I went from Guadalcanal . . . on one set of orders . . . crossed the Equator twice and the International Date Line three times. I had to go back to Guadalcanal to report. From Samoa you went north to Funafuti. Then you went to Tarawa in the Gilberts, then to Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands. From there I crossed the Equator and went to Guadalcanal a second time. That's where my headquarters was. By that time I had my points and besides, I wasn't in good health.

You say you weren't in good health.

I still had the dengue. You don't get over that very quickly. I had lost a lot of weight. I finally got back to Honolulu where they put me into a pool on Ford Island awaiting transportation back to the States. While I was there for about a week or two, I was on duty at the dispensary. I was reassigned overnight, went to Hilo, and there joined Air Group 88 and we went west. I got to Manus and went on one of the jeep carriers with a squadron as their doctor. I eventually went to a seaplane tender for a short time near Saipan. From there I went to Leyte and boarded the *Yorktown*. That's when they were organizing for the big push into Japan.

So you got to the *Yorktown* pretty late, then.

It was late '44.

Were you the only flight surgeon aboard the *Yorktown*?

Yes, with Air Group 88. We were the only air group on there. I was assigned to the air group rather than the ship's company.

Did you have any corpsmen assigned to you?

No.

So it was just you.

Yes. I worked in the sick bay with the ship's doctors and took my turn at standing watch and making rounds.

What kind of duties did you have as a flight surgeon?

Just keeping the pilots healthy.

They were flying lots of missions off the ship at that time.

Yes, running up and down the coast of Japan bombing and strafing. When the atomic bomb was dropped, we were all fired up ready to have a strike go that day. They called it off after we had the planes all armed and gassed. They warmed 'em up and then killed 'em. Then they warmed them up again. Then they called it off again. The whole fleet turned and was running east. We thought it was a typhoon. We had been in one typhoon.

What was that like?

It was bad. We didn't get any bad injuries rocking around, but some of the ships incurred damage. One carrier had its bow broken off in the heavy seas. Anyway, we found out later that was the day they dropped the atomic bomb.

And then it was over.

Oh, no. We kept pouring it on. Remember, the Japanese didn't make up their minds to surrender until August 15th. That's when they decided to lay down their arms.

Sometime in there after August 15th when they supposedly laid down their arms, we looked for prisoner of war camps. They just had walked off and left them locked up. And they had quit feeding them. We found some of our own pilots. They had put sheets for signs on top of buildings. We found people from Air Group VF-88. We dropped them a lot of stuff.

It was mostly carrier planes that went in and dropped food and supplies to the POWs. Do you remember what it was like aboard the carrier loading all that stuff?

I didn't see them loading most of the supplies, but I did see them loading Japanese money aboard planes to drop over Japan to help spoil their economy. The people didn't know whether it was real or funny money. We dumped tons of that stuff before the war was over. We also dropped loads of the stuff we called window, a tinsel-like material to jam their radar. It was curly strips of tin foil.

We also went over inspecting their air strips. They were supposed to have all their planes lined up with the propellers off on the ground in front of them.

Did you see any of that?

No. I didn't go on any of those flights but I did go when they were looking for POWs.

Did you all go steaming into Tokyo Bay for the surrender ceremony?

Yes, sir.

What do you remember about that?

I can remember everything because I was flying over it in the top turret of a TBS torpedo plane. They had 10,000 planes there. Every carrier out there had their whole squadron, which would be about a hundred planes each. Then the Army planes were stacked up on top of that--the B-17s and the B-29s. Everybody came in from a different direction. It was all well-coordinated. You circled around for a while in a certain place and then you went in holding a certain heading and altitude, not varying more than a hundred feet one way or the other because they were flying above you and below you in different directions. If you thought there was anything wrong with your plane, you had to fall out of the formation right away.

Were you flying at high altitude?

I wasn't wearing an oxygen mask, if that's what you mean, so we must have been below 10,000 feet. There were planes stacked up every hundred feet.

So, you were in the turret and got a good view.

But all you could see was this bunch of ships down below. The whole fleet had come in and anchored. We were prepared for any trickery. We weren't sure whether there was anything going on or not.

You must have been pretty excited to witness such an event.

Well, we were real happy.

Did you ever get ashore after the surrender?

Yes, while we were anchored in Tokyo Bay, I got to Yokosuka Naval Base. Harvey Reynolds, the intelligence officer, and I were able to get a jeep and go through the old naval air station. We went through the warehouses and what was their naval academy. I got a bunch of trinkets there, got a wheel off a ship. We got three of them. I got one, Harvey got one about 6 feet high. It's now in the yacht club at Cape May, NJ.

So everybody got a souvenir.

Not everybody because that stuff was real bulky. We had a jeep and we could only take what we could carry aboard the liberty boat to get back to the ship. There was a new 1941 Packard and the admiral got that. They hauled it up on the hanger deck with a big crane just like you'd pick up a plane.

I guess the admirals are entitled to the big stuff.
That's right.

Well, Dr. Helm. I appreciate you taking the time to talk with me today.